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ABSTRACT

Since a fundamental principle of communication is to adapt to the audience, authors of journal articles would be wise to familiarize themselves with their primary audience, the editor of the professional journal. Everything that an editor does results from an interplay of the editor's ideas about the purpose, scope, audience, literary quality, and physical characteristics of the journal. The editor's concept of the journal is reflected in all the chronological phases of the production process, including the search for materials, the response to queries, the evaluation of unsolicited manuscripts (sometimes using referees), and the processing of accepted manuscripts. This last phase contains details such as editing for organization and literary style, copyediting, printing galley proofs, author/editor proofreading, final (minor, necessary) alterations, cut-and-paste work on a dummy copy, reviewing page proofs, and final production. The total elapsed time from submission to publication is roughly three months to a year. This time element creates the need for patience on the author's part and emphasizes the significance of query letters, which can conserve time for both author and editor. (RL)

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THE EDITORIAL PROCESS

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Prepared for presentation to the Third Annual Workshop on Technical Writing, sponsored by the Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, 12-13 October 1979.

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THE EDITORIAL PROCESS

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A fundamental principle that we all have learned is that any communication should be adapted to its audience. In an effort to adapt this talk to this audience I have made the basic assumption that you are not would-be editors but perhaps would-be authors. I have also assumed that you have had little experience in working with a journal editor. Acting on those assumptions, therefore, I'll not try to tell you how to be a journal editor but rather will try to give you a glimpse of what one editor does with the manuscripts he sees and handles.

THE EDITOR'S CONCEPT OF HIS JOURNAL

Everything that an editor does is governed to a greater or lesser extent by the way he sees his journal: that is, by his mental image of the purpose, the audience, the literary quality, and the physical characteristics of his journal. To help you understand what I say later about my treatment of manuscripts, let me give you a brief description of my image of TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION, which is the official organ of the Society for Technical Communication, distributed quarterly to about 5,000 members of the society and to several hundred non-member subscribers.

Purpose and Scope

The basic purpose of the journal was defined by its editorial board in 1960[1]: "To provide a medium for the publication of information relevant to the professional interests of the members." In more detail, its purpose is "(1) To contribute to the professional advancement and recognition of the members; (2) to seek out and publish information which helps its readers to do their job better...; and (3) to begin building...a body of integrated, systematized knowledge, which is the heritage of a true profession." Its scope is "To include the occupational interests of all the members...."

Audience

The audience of the journal, therefore, is by definition the members of the society. Knowledge of the characteristics of this audience is essential if the journal is to carry out the purpose stated above. The most recent survey of our membership was conducted in 1979. It covered the member's major job function and work area, his education, his years of experience in the field, and his salary and age.[2]

Of these data, the most important to us are the facts concerned with the members' occupational interests. Without going into great detail, let me just say that the bulk of our members are in management of one communications function or another, or they work as writers, editors, or teachers. The kinds of things they are most likely to be working with are manuals, reports, proposals, journal articles, and handbooks, in that order. Knowing these facts, therefore, the editor can apportion the material in his journal roughly in accordance with the professional interests of his readers.

Literary Quality

Another facet of the editor's concept of his journal is what might be called its literary quality. By this term I do not mean necessarily just the quality of the writing itself, but also the kind of differences in substance that one might see between a newspaper, for example, and an archival journal intended for a library's shelves. The essence of both of these kinds of quality is embodied in the statement of criteria that is used by the judges who choose the outstanding article in our journal each year.

Some of the criteria concern the extent to which an article presents one or more of the following: (1) contributions to new knowledge, (2) new perspectives providing a more profound understanding of the profession, (3) useful, practical suggestions or techniques of assistance in everyday publication operations.

The rest of the criteria concern the extent to which the article embodies such characteristics of good form as effectiveness of organization, ability to maintain reader interest, correctness of grammar and punctuation, effectiveness of tables and illustrations, and the conveyance of a spirit of conviction or enthusiasm.

Physical Characteristics

Finally, the editor's vision of his magazine includes its physical appearance: its size, its format, its overall arrangement, and the multitude of details that go into a journal, including such things as the layout of the table of contents, the feature articles, and the departments. To be realistic I should admit here that the editor's vision of these physical aspects of his journal is constrained somewhat by external influences such as the budget he has to work with, the capacity of his printer, and various intangible factors such as tradition and the preferences of his board.

To summarize, then, let me repeat that the way an editor works with an author and the way he handles the author's manuscript will nearly always be the result of the interplay of these multiple influences. If an editor tells you to eliminate this part or to go back and do more research on that part of your paper, you can be sure that he is doing so in an effort to mold that paper more nearly to fit his vision.

WHAT THE EDITOR DOES

To give you an idea of how an editor works with authors and manuscripts, let us look at four more or less chronological phases of his job: the search for material, the response to queries, the evaluation of unsolicited manuscripts, and the processing of accepted manuscripts. I will use actual examples to illustrate most of these functions.

Search for Material

Because we are a relatively small society and because the workers in our field are not prolific producers of research, our editorial office is not flooded with manuscripts. It is ironic that in a society whose members are largely professional word handlers there is very little professional publication. Without attempting to go into the reasons for this situation, I'll just say that the editor finds it necessary to beat the bushes in a continuing effort to round up good articles.

One of the best hunting grounds is the proceedings of seminars such as this one. I make it a point to look carefully through all such volumes as come into my hands and have asked a number of authors for permission to reprint their papers in more or less modified form in our journal. For example, the third-quarter issue in 1977 had two such articles taken from the Proceedings

of our 1976 International Technical Communication Conference; and the next issue (a special on visual communication) will have several taken from the 1978 and 1979 conferences.

A second source of articles is the journal of other professional communication organizations. For instance, I found a fine research article in the British publication The Communicator of Scientific and Technical Information, which is the journal of the Institute for Scientific and Technical Information, and secured permission from the author to reprint it on the grounds that few of our readers would have seen the publication in which it originally appeared.

Another source for articles is the occasional detailed report I see on some aspect of technical communication. One such report was a small booklet called The Levels of Edit[3], published by the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in California. I asked the author to put the essence of that report into an article which appeared in the first-quarter issue in 1977.

On top of all of this, I use whatever help I can find. For example, I ask the associate editors of the journal to be on the lookout for good articles or potential articles, and similarly, I ask the referees to whom I send unsolicited manuscripts to keep the journal in mind as a potential vehicle for their own work. And while I'm at it, let me ask you....

Respond to Queries

In most cases, such invited articles are reasonably assured of publication, and with all this scouting around that I have described, you might wonder whether we ever have any room for unsolicited articles or whether an unsolicited article has much chance of being accepted. If you have such questions, I would suggest that you write a letter of inquiry to the editor of the journal that you are interested in writing for and tell him what you have in mind.

Such letters have three obvious advantages: First, it is much quicker for the editor to read and evaluate a letter than it is to read and evaluate a full-length article; second, the editor will therefore be able to give the author a prompt response; and third, if the proposal has some merit or promise, the letter gives the editor a valuable opportunity to consult with the author in advance and tell him how the article should be slanted or organized or researched or whatever.

For example, I received a query some months ago in which a would-be author described a series of three articles he proposed that would be based on a survey of STC membership. He enclosed a copy of the questionnaire and gave some information about the way the data would be processed and suggested a schedule for submitting the first article. In fact, his letter was the very model of a good inquiry. My reply to him was as follows (in part):

> I think I would rather see one article than three because it would probably be more efficient: only one stage-setting, one procedure description, etc. The results could be partitioned into three sections, as you suggest. I'm sure that with your experience, you'll avoid the common pitfall of many surveys, the recitation in text of the tabulated data, and concentrate instead on interpretation.

As I hope will be apparent from this example, the letter of inquiry is an efficient means for conserving the time of both the author and the editor. From your viewpoint as author, you can be fairly sure that if you follow the suggestions of the editor, you will end up with a publishable article, for most editors feel a sense of obligation once they have so encouraged an author. By the same token, if an editor rejects an idea you propose in a letter, you can congratulate yourself on having saved the effort necessary to draft the article.

Evaluate Unsolicited Manuscripts

Despite the obvious efficiency of the preliminary query, some authors will sit down and write a manuscript and forward it unannounced to the editor. Such unsolicited manuscripts have a rather high mortality rate, in part because they often represent impetuous jottings from the top of the head, supported by inadequate research and showing little or no consideration for the needs of the reader. These manuscripts stand small chance of acceptance. Nevertheless, the editor must evaluate them.

In doing so he has three obvious alternatives: (1) accept the manuscript (or suggest revisions with a view toward accepting it) because it clearly meets his standards; (2) reject it at once, because it clearly does not meet his standards; or (3) get an outside opinion. At TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION, unsolicited manuscripts are nearly always handled the third way. There are so many specialized fields in technical writing, not to mention graphics, production, cost control, word processing, presenta-

tions, and so on, that no editor could hope to be competent in all of them. Accordingly, when I receive a manuscript about preparing a technical manual, for example, a kind of document I have rarely read and never written, I immediately look for experts in manuals who can tell me whether the article is worth publishing.

I send the manuscript, along with a simple rating sheet, to two or three referees and ask them to give me a recommendation. The rating sheet asks the referee to give his basic reason for a favorable recommendation and to state what segment of the society the article will appeal to primarily. The answers to these questions are intended to insure that the publication of the candidate article would be in conformance with the objectives of the journal that I stated earlier. The referee's report also asks for suggestions for the revision of marginally acceptable manuscripts. And the referee is invited to annotate the manuscript itself if he feels like it. If he recommends outright rejection of the manuscript, he is asked to state his reasons in two forms: (1) in tactful language that can be passed on to the author, and (2) in a blunter statement for the benefit of the editor, who must make the final decision and who needs to know the plain facts.

When the evaluations from the referees are in, they form the basis for the editorial decision on acceptance, revision, or rejection, and for a letter to the author. When an article is rejected, the most helpful of the referees' comments are passed along--anonymously--in the hope of maintaining good will. Here's a brief example:

> I now have the reports of the referees to whom I sent your article and can report that two of them recommend against publishing it in Tech Com because they found it inappropriate for our readers. The third referee offered a rather extensive critique, which I'll reproduce on another page for your information. These comments suggest how you might proceed to revise the article to make it more suitable for our journal, and I hope you will need to them and let me see a different version.

When an article is marginally acceptable, the author is given specific instructions from the referees on how to revise it to make it fully acceptable. Here is a rather extensive example from which identifying words and phrases have been deleted, but it shows the thoroughness of the review and gives you an idea of what you might expect if you should miss the target slightly.

As I promised, I sent your article out to several referees for evaluation and comment, and I now have their reports. They all agree that you have the basis for a good article, but they also agree that the manuscript should not be published in Technical Communication in this form.

Let me pass along some of their general comments:

> Despite a few helpful suggestions, the article does not significantly advance the state-of-the-art. The article also seems too general and comprehensive to satisfy particular needs for in-house programs. In particular the article slights problem definition and development and articulation of course objectives in favor of a catalogue of course topics and techniques. The intended audience becomes increasingly unclear, as the article shifts from the training officer's concerns to an instructor's concerns. The author should focus entirely on the training officer's concerns and misconceptions.

In addition, one referee offered some detailed suggestions for possible revisions, enclosed, and marked up his copy of the manuscript, also enclosed.

I hope you will consider these constructive comments carefully and find time to revise this piece into a solid, careful contribution to our journal.

By this time you may be wondering if we ever accept an unsolicited manuscript, and if we do, whether it must be letter perfect. The answers are yes and no, respectively. When an unsolicited manuscript with obvious good qualities comes in, we will work with the author as long as necessary to get it into publishable shape. A recent example involves a paper looking at some of the history of technical writing. After reading it, I wrote the author the following:

> I read it with interest and then pulled out and re-read your ITCC paper [which this article extended]. As a result I'd like to ask you to consider combining the two for me. The conference paper would need a little adapting, primarily to include some judiciously selected examples of technical writing from the past. We can't expect the average reader to rush right out

and locate Franklin's works, for example, and yet your point about Ben's writing skill loses all force without direct confirmation by the reader.

In turn, this piece would need revision, so I am returning it in the hope that you'll find time to meld it with the other one. I look forward to seeing the result.

The author heeded these suggestions and submitted a revised version of his paper. And after checking it over carefully, I returned it for the second time with the suggestion that certain references be added. I even included copies of the articles I wanted him to refer to. Again he complied and resubmitted the article, and it has now been published.

The point for you to note, I think, is that any suggestions the editor or the referees offer to an author are intended to help the author make his paper acceptable. They are not intended to be demeaning or insulting, and you should not take offense at them. That does not mean, however, that you should not argue with the editor or the referee if you are sure of your position. And in matters of professional opinion where the author and a referee disagree, the editor will usually side with the author. It is, after all, your paper, with your byline.

Process Accepted Manuscripts

To complete the picture of what an editor does with a manuscript, I should give you a brief view of how the finally accepted manuscript is processed. It is edited first for organization and then for literary style (that is, to eliminate wordiness, awkwardness, choppiness, etc.) and is finally turned over to the copy editor to be given a detailed marking for such matters as punctuation, capitalization, headings, type style, etc. About three months before the article is to appear, the manuscript is bundled up with the rest of the copy for that issue and sent to the printer. In our case, the package goes to Waverly Press in Baltimore. There the copy is again marked up by a copy editor for composition (you wouldn't believe what your carefully prepared typescript looks like by now), and it is set in type. Galley proofs are pulled and sent to the author and the editor for proofreading.

At this point every author has second and third thoughts. He would like to change this or that idea or expression. Seeing his material in type gives him a new perspective. However, the

editor will normally allow only necessary author's alterations because he is charged for any changes in the copy that are not due to the typesetter's errors. The author's corrected galleys are combined with those from the copy editor, and a consolidated marked-up copy is returned to the typesetter for corrections and changes.

At the same time, a set of galleys is cut apart and pasted up into a dummy of the final journal format. In our case, the dummy is returned to Baltimore, where the final pages are made up. Copies of the page proofs are sent to the editor for checking and proofing, and when the corrected proofs are received by the printer, the production process is begun.

The total time that elapses between the submittal of your rough draft and the mailing of printed copies can be from three months to a year, depending on how much review and revision it receives and how big our backlog is. Therefore, when your article is submitted for publication, you should automatically swallow a large patience pill.

CONCLUSION

I began all this with the assumption that you are interested in publishing an article in a professional journal. If you don't expect too much and if you are willing to work and to listen to the advice of the editor and the referees, you can succeed. And when you do, you may find that writing for publication is addictive. I wish you all good fortune and invite you to submit any appropriate articles to TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION. But please--write me a letter first!

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